

“The points, the points, the points”: Exploring the impact of performance oriented education on the espoused values of Senior Cycle poetry teachers in Ireland.

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ABSTRACT: Teachers of English experience significant pressure in attempting to meet the requirements of the national examination system, while also seeking to uphold their own ideological and philosophical perspectives on the value of poetry. Drawing on a mixed method study into the teaching of poetry at post-primary level in Ireland conducted between 2007 and 2010, this paper examines current methodological trends in poetry pedagogy. The research identifies a marked imbalance in the prioritisation of pupil development, with many teachers privileging the cognitive development of pupils’ poetic understanding over the affective. The paper also suggests limited attention to the interwoven dimensions of the affective and cognitive domains in the teaching of poetry at senior cycle level in Irish schools. This paper advocates the need to support teachers to develop an integrated pedagogy for teaching poetry in second-level schools, which engages both the critical and the creative in a meaningful manner.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, pedagogy, affective, cognitive, education.

The taxonomy of educational objectives, inclusive of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains as developed by Bloom (1956), continues to hold significant influence in teacher education, remaining as one of the most widely applied texts in education (Schoen, 2008; Fisher, 2005). In the last number of years, however, technical rationalism and measurability have become prevalent in post-primary educational provision (Eisner, 2003; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Gleeson & O’Donabhain, 2009). This ideological shift in educative ethos challenges attempts to provide balanced development in pupils’ psychomotor, affective and cognitive domains, as prioritised in directives for successful pedagogy (Ediger & Bhaskara Rao, 2006).

It has been argued that the artificial separation of the domains in the construction of Blooms’ taxonomy has led to the perception of the affective domain as non-cognitive and thus requiring limited mental engagement (Efland, 2002). Some suggest that the cognitive and psychomotor domains lend themselves more easily to measurement and specification and thus are awarded higher levels of privilege and recognition among educationalists (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002). Given the difficulty of measurability associated with the affective domain combined with its inherently subjective nature, questions regarding the value of the affective domain have emerged across the disciplines (Jensen, 2001; Sinclair, 2009; Alsop, 2005) with the rational/emotional debate featuring strongly in educational discourse (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007; Crawford, 2007; Robinson, 2001). This debate centres on the role of emotion in education and the prioritization of the cognitive and affective domains.

The influence of the Enlightenment, with its focus on empiricism, scientific rigour and reductionism, has meant that the emotional realm is perceived by those who uphold such values as inappropriate territory (Porter, 2001; Fitzpatrick, Jones, Knellwolf, McCalman, 2004). Indeed Kant regarded prioritisation of the emotional realm as malign to the ambitions of a successful education (Beard, 2005). However, recognition of the importance of achieving balance between the affective and cognitive domains in education has grown in recent decades with, amongst others, Dewey (1948) advocating the interconnectivity of lived-experience. Dewey (1934) advocated the aesthetic and intellectual as inherently interwoven, asserting that one could not be successfully separated from the other. Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, (1964) also expressed hesitancy with regard to the artificial separation of the affective and cognitive domains and indicated that “nearly all cognitive objectives have an affective component if we search for it” (p. 48).

The contributions of Dewey and Krathwohl et al. have led to an increasing recognition of the importance of a pedagogical space which allows “the exploration, expression and acceptance of emotions and feelings of self and others in ways that contribute to learning” (Beard et al., 2007, p. 240). Balancing the cognitive, psychomotor, affective and indeed the aesthetic dimensions of learning holds significant benefits for students. There is need to dispel the common perception that poetry is estranged from any developmental cognitive process (Best, 1992), as young people who regularly participate in the arts have been found to learn better and to perform better in creativity, fluency, originality and elaboration than their counterparts (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). Pupils in “arts-intensive” settings were also found to be strong in their abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations and take risks in learning (Catterall et al., 1999).

Acknowledging the interconnectivity of the domains through a domain sensitive pedagogy holds the potential to provide enhanced learning and developmental opportunities within the poetry class. Research into the conceptualization of creativity has been gaining momentum over the last decade, in an attempt to construct a comprehensive theory of creativity (Russ, 2003; McWilliam & Haukka, 2008). As a result, a more refined knowledge base and sophisticated understanding of the field of creativity is emerging (Mumford, 2003). Treffinger (1980) and Treffinger, Isaksen, and Firestein (1983) developed a “model of creative learning” comprising three levels: divergent functions, complex thinking and feeling processes, and involvement in real challenges. What is particularly noteworthy about this model is the presence of both cognitive and affective domains at each level of creative learning. The synergy of domains is seen within this model to be inherent in the establishment of creativity. Creativity is consequently considered both a cognitive and affective endeavour (Fasko, 2001; Runco & Chand, 1995; Houtz & Krug, 1995; Claxton, Pannells & Rhoads, 2005).

However, the development of an integrated pedagogy which affords space for the development of creativity is not without its challenges, particularly in the current culture of technical, rational, scientific and points-oriented education (Pike, 2004; Government of Ireland, 1999). Misson and Sumara (2005) argue that meeting the demands of an increasingly “product”-driven educational system, has led to the emergence of a technicised model of educational pedagogy that relegates affective development to that of decorative functionality. For the teaching of poetry this in

effect means that poetic analysis tends now to be dominated by technical deconstruction (Meehan, 1999; NCCA, 2009) and time given to poetic inquiry is challenged by the focus upon exam “achievement” (Eisner, 2003). The aesthetic endeavour in poetry teaching, according to Fowler and Wilson (2001) and McCracken and McCracken (2001), is now frequently displaced by prosaic standardisation.

The power of poetry as an art form to develop the cognitive domain of the pupil is widely acknowledged (Bresler, 2007; Davis, 2008; Efland, 2004). When contrasted with other genres of English studies, the study of poetry emerges favourably vis-à-vis the cognitive development of students. Students find poetry to be more cognitively challenging and emotionally engaging than prose and frequently spend longer periods of time analysing and contemplating “the poem” rather than prose (Peskin, 2007). Engaging in the process of poetry composition can act as an effective medium for the development of the cognitive domain (Dymoke, 2003). In crafting poetry pupils are challenged, *inter alia*, to transform knowledge through various formal means, to analyse effective thematic exposition, to cogitate on semantics and syntactics, to synthesis meaning, to investigate sound and to construct form, structure and cohesion (Ruurs, 2002; Tompkins, 2008; Jordan, Jensen, & Greenleaf, 2001; Wilson, 2007). As a tool of cognition, poetry challenges us to “pare down our reality to its linguistic essentials, whose interplay, be it clash or fusion, yields epiphany or revelation, and because it exploits the rhythmic and euphonic properties of the language that in themselves are revelatory” (Brodsky, 1995, p. 208). It is therefore generally accepted, given the widely documented value of poetry, that this art form has a key role to play in the cognitive development of students.

Perhaps less widely valued within the current educational framework is the importance of its contribution to the development of the affective domain for students. This research sought to explore these issues, focusing on the teaching of English poetry in Irish schools. Like Lynch (2001), the authors suggest that individual and expressive emotional output is important for the contemporary adolescent. Poetry can have a significant role to play in the education or refinement of affect (Carr, 2005) and poetic exploration can cultivate subjective knowing and act as a catalyst in the development of complex emotional expression (Stewart, 2002; Collins, 2008). It offers a cathartic medium through which individuals can engage with the full range of human emotion and experience by providing what Motion (2001) terms a “meditative space”;

Poetry makes a kind of singing sense out of confusing experience. Through words, it is possible to shape and articulate our most joyous and troubling moments. When we write of loneliness, even of what may feel like despair, even of what may be despair, we discover that there is in language itself a kind of resilience, a surging, hopeful energy that is redemptive and reassuring (Kennelly, 1999, p. 184).

THE IRISH EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Post-primary education in Ireland is comprised of two distinct but interconnected “cycles”. Students enter post-primary education at the age of 12 or 13 years and immediately enter the Junior Cycle. This programme spans three years, building on the education received at primary level and culminates in the Junior Certificate Examination. Following the completion of the Junior Cycle, students at the age of 15-

17 years enter the Senior Cycle, more commonly referred to as the Leaving Certificate years, the name of which derives from the final exam at the end of this two year cycle. The Senior Cycle builds on the Junior Cycle and culminates in a summative examination entitled the Leaving Certificate Examination. A strong transdisciplinary emphasis on the summative examination exists at Senior Cycle level (Government of Ireland, 1999), as eligibility for university placement is governed by points attained in this examination. Thus, the Leaving Certificate years form a distinctly pressurised time for student and teacher alike. The Points Commission Report (1999) conducted to review Ireland's system of matriculation, highlights a number of damaging effects attributed to this points system. Issues raised included negative impact on students' personal development; a narrowing of the curriculum arising from the tendency to teach to the examination rather than to the aims of the curriculum; and an undue focus on the attainment of examination results. The prevailing, measurement-driven and performance-oriented model dominant in Irish education (Glatter, 2003) has a significant impact on the pedagogical methodologies drawn on by the poetry teacher within the classroom. The dominant influence of the points system has led to a teaching to the exam ideology (Government of Ireland, 1999) within post-primary schooling, the effects of which are explored in this paper, with a specific focus on the provision of an integrated pedagogical experience within the poetry class.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framework

This research uses the combined theoretical framework of the positivist and interpretative paradigms. In doing so this study takes a pragmatic research approach (Yardley & Bishop, 2008), as the aim of the research was not to seek a truth independent from human experience, but to enhance experience through the attentive exploration of socio-cultural values and practices (Maxcy, 2003). The research employed the use of questionnaires in phase one, to facilitate the collection of data from a wide distribution of post-primary schools. However, this research also focuses on subjective realities; therefore quantitative data alone was not deemed sufficient to explore often deeply embedded individual attitudes (Dyson, 2006). Interviews were employed to explore in greater detail emergent areas of interest from phase one.

Phase one

Following a review of the literature, a questionnaire developed by O'Neill (1998) was selected as suitable for adaptation using the questionnaire development framework of Radhakrishna (2007). O'Neill's questionnaire sought to establish the perspectives of poetry teachers working within the Junior Cycle (the pre-requisite to the Senior Cycle or Leaving Certificate years) in relation to their professional role. Permission to adapt the instrument was granted by O'Neill. An analysis of the adapted questionnaire using the Gunning-Fog Index formula demonstrated a high level of readability, with a score of 10.17 being accorded to the instrument. Reliability was established by examining the test-retest reliability of the questionnaire. Over a two-week interval period, a test-retest correlation coefficient of 0.82 ($p \geq 0.001$; $n=8$) was achieved. A pilot of the adapted instrument was then carried out to obviate the occurrence of glitches incurred in the questionnaire adaptation. The pilot was administered to two, third-level teacher educators (both of whom previously held poetry teaching positions at post-primary

level), two researchers in the field from alternate third-level institutions, two members of a support service body for English teachers and nine, Senior-Cycle, post-primary poetry teachers. The finalised instrument comprised sixty-seven, semi-structured questions focusing on the areas of: the role of the poetry teacher, poetry studies, the Leaving Certificate syllabus, classroom resources, pedagogy and the Leaving Certificate assessment (Table 1). This paper reports on section one, role conceptualization, and section five of the teacher questionnaire. Closed questions, both dichotomous and 5-point Likert Scale, were used to provide specific information based on a prescribed range of responses. Questions constructed in this form act as reliable and efficient methods for data collection due to the uniformity of data they provide (Fink, 2006). Open questions were used to explore more complex subjective teacher responses and to afford enhanced investigation into areas of significance for interviewees.

Key research area	Embedded issues
Role of the teacher	Role conceptualisation, actualisation of self-perception, self-confidence, levels of enjoyment, perception of success within the poetry class, sources of reference, challenges.
Poetry Studies	Perceived importance, frequently used poets, use of poetry beyond examination prescription, pupils' abstract thinking ability, pupil motivation, poetry selection.
Leaving Certificate Syllabus	Familiarity, pupils' interests, thematic diversity, course content, prescription of poets, linkage to the Junior Cycle, cognitive and affective development, recommendations for improvement.
Resources	Departmental resources, ICT, in-service, availability of resources, acquisition of resources, proposed resources
Pedagogy	Class frequency, illustration, response journals, creative imitation, drama in education techniques, oracy, poet visits, memorisation, pupil engagement,
Leaving Certificate Assessment	Alignment with the syllabus, benefits, influence on pupils, cognitive and affective development, recommendations.

Table 1: Phase one research areas

Based on an approximation of 4 English teachers working in each post-primary school in Ireland, it was decided to distribute the questionnaire to 50 post-primary schools across the country to reach a cohort of 200 teachers. The research cohort for this phase was selected using a probability sampling method (Scott & Morrison, 2006), with schools selected via a process of simple random sampling (Fink, 2006). All schools included on the Irish Department of Education post-primary school list (n=730) were accorded a randomly allocated number between 0 and 1 in Microsoft Excel using the code =RAND(). The schools were then reordered according to their number from lowest to highest. The top one hundred schools from this list were selected for contact. Once consent was obtained from 50 schools the research cohort was established. A response rate of 58% (n=29 schools; n=80 teachers) was achieved. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 13.0. As questionnaires were completed anonymously, responses are coded Q.1 (Questionnaire 1) / Q.2 (Questionnaire 2) etc. for data dissemination.

Phase two

Phase two served to deepen exploration into the emergent issues arising from phase one through a series of teacher interviews. It aimed to provide teachers with the opportunity to detail their individual pedagogy rationale, without the constraints of a set schedule of invariant questions (Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, & Son, 2004). The use of semi-structured interview was employed to gather data on the more intangible aspects of school culture, that is, values, assumptions and beliefs (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Given that a teacher's experience of poetry education is influenced by the gender of the group being taught (Pike, 2000; Hanratty, 2008), school stratification was employed. The selected cohort from phase one was stratified according to single-sex, boys' schools (SSB), single-sex girls' schools (SSG), and mixed grouping schools (MG). Stratified random sampling was used to identify the research cohort of phase two.

Due to the in-depth nature of the interviews, data drawn from interviews with 10% of the research cohort (n=8 teachers) was determined to be satisfactory for this exploratory study (Silverman, 2005). Pilot interviews (n=2) enabled the researcher to identify certain “unscheduled probes” that would be necessary in the subsequent interviews (Berg, 2001). Interviews were conducted with two poetry teachers from the SSB and SSG cohorts respectively and with four poetry teachers from the MG cohort. An eclectic range of perspectives was emergent from this research phase, as only one interviewee per participating school was called upon. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes with two interviews extending to seventy-five minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of data representation. The interviews focused on both key emergent themes from phase one and also on issues of importance for the interviewees. Data analysis for the purpose of this research was conducted deductively, based on the research questions posed in phase one and inductively, based on the emergence of new themes (Aneshensel, 2002). In order to maintain interviewee anonymity, data for this phase of the research is reported upon in the form of I.1 (Interview 1) /I.2 (Interview 2) and so on.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was sought from and granted by the University of Limerick Department of Education and Professional Studies Research Ethics Committee. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. Participants were assured that data would be treated as confidential information at all stages of the research process and that requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998) were observed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Dichotomised aspirations

Poetry teachers were asked to provide a subjective definition of their “purpose” as a Leaving Certificate poetry teacher. Given the complex nature of teaching, research participants were not limited to the identification of a single aim. The development of

aesthetic appreciation amongst pupils emerged as the most frequently cited aim, with 60% of poetry teachers in phase one noting the development of this attribute as inherent to their role conceptualization. The interview provided greater insight on this issue:

I associate poetry with almost like music. I consider poetry touching that extra dimension in a person's life. The aesthetics. It's a gift they're going to take with them for life. I think it should be treated differently to all other elements of the English course, being almost like a gift that you can give them (I.8).

I want them to look at a poem and I want them to get excited by this poem. I want them to be enthused by poetry to the extent that I am. I would love to breathe more enthusiasm into the students because it's very personal, it's from the soul and I want them to see that (I.3).

The benefit of fostering an aesthetic appreciation amongst students was outlined by teachers to be twofold in purpose. It was noted that the development of poetic appreciation amongst pupils during their formative years would assist in nurturing continued positive engagement with poetry subsequent to their post-primary schooling: “I want to inspire my students so that they will develop a life long love/relationship with poetry” (Q.17); “My primary purpose is to stimulate an interest in poetry itself. I'd like them to leave the school having, like myself, one or two favourite poets themselves (Q.42); “To stimulate an interest in poetry for poetry's sake” (Q.63). It was also noted by teachers that pupil appreciation of the genre assists in fostering a more positive attitude in relation to the Leaving Certificate exam: “With the Leaving Certificate if they have a positive attitude towards poetry they don't see the exam as a huge mountain to climb” (I.2); “If I can get them to appreciate a poet and understand where they are coming from they will be much better equipped for the exam” (I.5). However, the challenge of fostering an aesthetic appreciation of poetry amongst pupils was noted by one teacher who asserted “moderation” to be the key to successfully engaging pupils;

It's hard to convince a seventeen-year-old fella that poems have aesthetic pleasure. It's a nice idea and it would be something you would try to covertly bring in. It wouldn't be something as overt as aren't poems lovely. Moderation is probably a good thing (I.2).

While acknowledging the value of experiencing poetry as an aesthetic art form, teachers noted that this educational ambition is quite often relegated to that of an aspiration owing to the obligations of an exam-oriented educational framework;

It is very exam orientated and you just have to make sure you've covered the poems for the exam (I.7).

I suppose ideally I'd like them to like poetry and maybe even read poetry when school is over but I have a feeling that for some of my students once they finish English that is it for the poetry (I.6).

Forty-three per cent of questionnaire respondents highlighted a more technicised self-conceptualization, asserting their role as a Leaving Certificate poetry teacher in terms of developing lower-order cognitive capacity: “To introduce and analyse the poetry of selected poets. Also to provide various notes and questions on those poems” (Q.34);

“On a day to day basis my purpose is to explain any difficulties in content and language” (Q.27); “To provide students with an overview of each poet on the course paying attention to theme, language and style” (Q18); “To teach the students how to access a poem for exam purposes” (Q.45); “To deconstruct poems for my students” (Q.62).

The technicised demands perceived by teachers to be exacted upon them by the pressures of the Leaving Certificate exam were reported by many respondents to have a subversive effect on their aim to promote aesthetic appreciation. As noted by one teacher:

When it comes down to it we’re working within the confines of the exam and basically students have to know their poetry thematically and the language used by the poets. That tends to be my purpose in teaching poetry, unfortunately I suppose but that is the way it is (I.5).

One teacher offered an alternate perspective from their experience of teaching poetry on a concurrent Senior Cycle programme, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). This programme caters for less academically oriented students and therefore is not as driven by summative assessment as the Established Leaving Certificate programme (Smyth, McCoy, Darmody, & Dunne, 2008).

If you compare the teaching to that of English in LCA – for me as an English teacher of LCA I have no constraints whatsoever. I can do whatever I like and my teaching is completely different. In LCA it’s great fun, we could be studying the lyrics of a modern song. We have covered a lot of Coldplay’s music. I ask them what is their favourite song, they bring in their favourite song and we get the lyrics off it then and work from there creating poetry (I.3)

Developing pupil voice

Sixty-seven per cent of Senior Cycle poetry teachers in the questionnaire identified that they “sometimes”/“rarely” encourage their pupils to compose poetry and a further 17% of teachers asserted they “never” ask pupils to write their own poems. The challenges of encouraging student composition were discussed during interview;

We don’t really have the time (for poetry writing) which is a pity I suppose because that’s where you should be encouraging the creative juices to begin (I.5).

This is a major problem. Unfortunately I’ll admit straight out I don’t do it at Leaving Cert. It’s because of time constraints. They want to be doing what’s on the course and I’m afraid that’s what we have to give them unfortunately. It would be an awful lot more value to them if we did get them to write poetry (I.8).

No we don’t. I don’t have time and I feel embarrassed to tell you that but no. It’s something I should do more often but I’m concentrating so much on the syllabus, the curriculum, the curriculum and I’m so obsessed with it that I’m forgetting; I’m leaving out very important details like getting student to compose themselves (I.3).

One teacher suggested that the pressure to work solely within the remit of “examinable material” came also from students when he suggested that pupils approach the Leaving Certificate years “like a machine” (I.4). Discussing his failed attempts to develop his pupils’ poetry writing skills he asserted: “I’ve tried before (to

develop pupils poetry writing skills) but students say this isn't relevant...the points, the points, the points". The questionnaire data reiterates this trend with just 16% of teachers surveyed asserting they "always"/"often" work on the development of pupils' poetry writing skills within the poetry class.

While the development of students' affective and subjective responses to prescribed poetry appeared more positive with over half (52%) of teachers asserting that they "always" ask pupils for a personal interpretation of a poem and a further 41% "often" asking pupils for a personal response, the interviews revealed a high level of superficiality in the development of pupils' subjective responses to poetry. Teachers discussed at length the reluctance of pupils to contribute their subjective interpretations of a poem and also to embrace the notion of multiple meanings in poetry:

I think the students would prefer if the teacher would just say what the poem meant but I do say it's not like a maths problem where there's one right answer, there's many ways of looking at the line but if I go on with it, they're saying well which one is it? I think they prefer something more definite at the end to finally come to a conclusion (I.7).

Interviewees suggested a sense of dependency on the part of both poetry teacher and pupil for pre-scripted responses or "notes" on individual poems:

Leaving Cert are waiting for notes and they don't want to think (I.6).

Youngsters are getting lazy and just waiting for the notes and others are lacking in confidence and they would think whatever they write down wouldn't be as good as what they would learn off by heart (I.8).

They think if they have these notes and they regurgitate them that they will do better. You will always have the few who will work away with you but more and more you're getting the students who are waiting for the notes (I.1).

I know teachers who give reams and reams and reams of pages of their own notes to students (I.3).

While outlining their attempts to obtain a personal response from pupils on the poetry studied, teachers frequently suggested that their attempts were often thwarted by demands for detailed notes and conclusive meanings. This impact on teacher motivation is reflected on by one interviewee who asserted:

I'm fighting against this and some of them are just sitting back passively you know ones who are very bright. They're just not engaging because they know they're going to learn these (notes) off. Then when you give them a question some of them regurgitate the notes without even twisting them to answer the question. I find that very disheartening (I.4).

In contrast, interviewee 4 suggested the provision of notes to be an uncontested and habitual feature of their class;

The bulk of my methodology, the bulk of how I impart my knowledge to them is note taking. We don't spend too long on each poem before I move onto the next one. I

certainly would give them a good idea of what the poem is about before I move onto the next one.

The potential impact of this style of poetry teaching on pupil enjoyment was highlighted by one interviewee who asserted “an awful lot of those students that are forced with all their notes, after their Leaving Cert they will never ever open a poetry book again.” (I.8). Interviewee 4 highlighted the influence of performance accountability on classroom practice;

I think some teachers give them out 'cause they want their pupils to do well. They're afraid it will reflect on them if their pupils don't do well and that they won't do well if they don't have all these phrases (I.7).

Pedagogical regression did not go unnoticed by interviewee 1 who remarked; “It's ironic in some cases that we're back to the rote learning which we've been trying for the last fifty years to get away from”.

Over half (59%) of the teachers in this research stated that they “rarely” (26%) or “never” (33%) ask pupils to illustrate poetry through an alternative art form, for example, drawing. Reasons for this included: pupils' perceptions of the activity according to their teachers, “They would consider it childish” (I.1); teachers' conflicting perceptions of the purpose of this activity and the purpose of poetry teaching at Leaving Certificate Level (“It's not an art exam” (I.2)); and finally, time constraints as noted by interviewee 8 (“The problem is it is very difficult with the time constraints. I know if you asked me straight out what I should do – that [illustration of poems] is what I should do. It helps the pupils to empathise with the poet themselves”).

Drama is also prioritised in the Leaving Certificate English program (NCCA, 2010a). Yet, 75% of poetry teachers surveyed stated that they “never” (33%) or “rarely” (42%) use drama in education methods in their Leaving Certificate class. Again, teachers' perceptions of pupils' response was cited by many as a primary inhibiting factor;

It's very hard to get a group of seventeen-year-old fellas to stand up and do a freeze frame of Elizabeth Bishop. I think you're making a lot of people self-conscious about poetry that don't need to be self conscious about poetry. Then what happens is you spend five minutes cajoling someone to go up and do something, then when they're up there they feel uncomfortable about doing it and they look at you and think, I'm not two anymore (I.2).

I just couldn't see myself winning over a class group with it (I.7).

DISCUSSION

The data suggest a tension between teachers' altruistic ambitions and the pressure to meet the requirements of summative assessment. While fostering an aesthetic appreciation of poetry, which engages pupils affectively and creatively, emerged as central to teachers' perception of their professional role, in practice this was limited. The impact of a prevailing technical rationalist culture in which exam achievement is afforded priority over a broader appropriation of academic accomplishment was posited as particularly challenging by teachers in this research. “Teaching to the

exam” also emerged as a significant theme. This theme permeated not only teachers’ pedagogical philosophies, but also influenced their methodological approaches. A widespread reductionist approach to the teaching of poetry was acknowledged by participants.

The findings highlight also the existence of a trend towards pupil passivity. The dominance of a traditionalist, lower-order and teacher-centred approach to poetry teaching was acknowledged by research participants, who posited that the current curriculum framework which contextualizes their everyday classroom pedagogies is failing to provide the necessary space for a more aesthetic, creative and engaging student-centred approach to the teaching of poetry. While the development of student voice and of the affective domain is asserted as a primary ambition of the Leaving Certificate English syllabus (NCCA, 2010b), it appears challenged within the poetry classroom. It appears that the potential for affective development via poetry composition remains negligible at Leaving Certificate Level, as this research points to the majority of poetry teachers choosing not to embark on poetry composition with their pupils. While respondents noted the benefits of poetry composition within the class, they also noted a sense of pressure to work solely within the remit of “examinable material”, thus rendering poetic composition and the development of its affective merits, a largely utopian aspiration.

Meeting the demands not only of a system privileging technicism and exam performance, but also the coexisting demands of students who subscribe to a reductionist model of study was posited to afford little room for pedagogical creativity. Notwithstanding the subordination of affective development through poetic composition, this research suggests that the relegation of pupils’ subjective responses to poetry is occurring due to the pressure of achieving standardisation and measurable outputs for the purpose of examination. The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus asserts that students must “develop an awareness of their own responses, affective, imaginative, and intellectual, to aesthetic texts” (NCCA, 2010c p. 14). Development of pupils’ subjective and affective responses to poetry texts is significant in achieving this aim. However, disparity is evidenced by teachers in this research, between the development of pupils’ “subjective voice” for the purpose of the exam and the more affective-oriented development of pupils’ voice, serving to enhance pupils’ sense of self-efficacy and cultural awareness within the genre. As a result of this dichotomy, difficulties in striving to foster pupils’ own voice emerge within the poetry class, with pupils frequently attempting to discover the “correct” or “set” meaning of a poem, a trend which is exacerbated by the use of pre-scripted notes at Leaving Certificate Level. This prescription potentially facilitates the undervaluing of poetry and contributes to a failure to appreciate the value of subjective interpretation within the genre.

Differentiated modes of representation play an important role in advancing pupils’ affective development, skills of comprehension and literacy and enjoyment (Kendrick, 2004; Cowan & Albers, 2006; Buckelew, 2003; McDonald & Fisher, 2006). One of the most widely espoused forms of differentiated representation in the poetry class remains the poetic representation through visual illustration. It is asserted that the succinctness of poetry can focus pupils’ minds on their affective responses and that the visual imagery of poetry consequently lends itself to illustration (Hope, 2008). This research indicates reticence amongst teachers to provide space for

differentiated representation in the form of illustration within the poetry classroom. In addition, while drama-in-education as an alternate form of representation provides a highly accessible medium through which the affective domain via personal and social development can be catered for (Cramer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2007; Wright, 2006), the research suggests negation of this methodology.

IDENTIFYING CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES

A number of conceptual boundaries for the teaching of poetry studies at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland emerged from this research. The data suggest that teachers grappled with the fear of “getting it wrong”. In an educational system which places value and status on “getting it right” and “knowing the correct answer”, it appears that teachers may be reluctant to move into unfamiliar terrain both pedagogically and philosophically. The pressure exerted by summative examination can arguably be charged with limiting the ambitions of both pupil and teacher, and placing a dependence on the “known” and the “unambiguous answers” (Dymoke, 2003). The findings of this research are not in isolation but are reflective of research emerging within the wider educational community, which appears to mirror this pedagogical trend (Benton, 2000; McNess, Broadfoot & Osborn 2003; Dymoke, 2002).

Time constraints were also asserted to be a significant factor for many teachers of poetry. The quantity of course content and limitations of time were viewed by the teachers in this research as barriers to change and experimentation. On the topic of poetry writing, one teacher noted:

This is a major problem. Unfortunately I'll admit straight out I don't do it at Leaving Cert. It's because of time constraints. It's terrible you see that an awful lot of us buy into the idea that students want notes. They want to be doing what's on the course and I'm afraid that's what we have to give them unfortunately. It would be an awful lot more value to them if we did get them to write poetry (I.6).

From a broader perspective, meeting the demands of a top-down accountability system in an era of left-brained dominance (Pink, 2006) is seen as a pedagogical barrier by the majority of teachers in this research. Over the last decade, researchers have pointed to the damaging impact of “cognitive culture” (Eisner, 2003) on creativity and innovation, an occurrence charged with separating intelligence from feeling (Robinson, 2001). Eisner (2002) asserts that we are “creating an industrial culture in our schools, one whose values are brittle and whose conception of what's important narrow” (p. 3). Consequently students have become experts at consuming knowledge rather than producing it (Sawyer, 2005). Indeed, societal acquiescence within the realm of this cultural circumstance is highlighted by Flutter and Ruddock (2004), who claim that “the public have been captivated by the language and style of this winner-takes-it-all culture” (p. 1).

FINDING A BALANCE

In a world beset with conflicts, internal as well as external, isn't it of equal if not greater importance to balance the sharpening of our intellects with the systematic cultivation of our hearts? (Zajonc, 2006, p. 1)

Contemporary society and consequently education, prizes rationality, logic and cognitive exposition so much so that critics of a technical approach to schooling have charged it with “freezing people’s imaginative thinking” (Greene, 2000, p. 124). Such a technicised emphasis contrasts greatly with the innovative and aesthetic roots of poetry. Poetic analysis has consequently become synonymous with technical deconstruction (Meehan, 1999; NCCA, 2009); poetic inquiry replaced by exam “achievement” (Eisner, 2003) and aesthetic endeavour, frequently displaced by prosaic standardization (Fowler & Wilson, 2001; McCracken & McCracken, 2001). Kind, Irwin, Grauer, & Cosson (2005) advocate the need for a different type of educative focus;

Education is longing for a deeper more connected, more inclusive, and more aware way of knowing. One that connects heart and hand and head and does not split knowledge into dualities of thought and being, mind, and body, emotion and intellect (p. 33).

Clearly teachers of poetry face challenges in terms of their professional aspirations and the reality of their classroom practice. Teachers need to be supported in order to remain true to their pedagogical aims, particularly in educative cultures where common practice may differ significantly from these aims. Pink (2006) argues that the demands of society have surpassed technical knowledge and now call for the development a conceptual era, an era in which advancement is inexorably linked with imagination, creativity and innovation. Inherent in the development of such aptitudes is the inculcation of an integrated pedagogy into the classroom, which takes a holistic approach to pupil development. An integrated pedagogy recognises and celebrates the interconnectivity of “lived experience” (Dewey, 1948) through both the cognitive and affective domains and, in doing so, creates a learning environment in which pupils are enabled to develop as both creative and critical thinkers. One of the key missions of the schools must be to educate for creativity (Sawyer, 2005). Creativity should hold a fundamental role in the English classroom (NCCA, 2010a) which is affirmed and celebrated.

Moreover, acknowledging this necessity calls for an awareness of the reality that creativity is not necessarily comfortable (Misson & Sumara, 2005). From an educational context it involves posing questions, testing new methods, re-orienting relationships and at times “getting it wrong”. It involves the subversion of pre-existing beliefs. Stepping outside traditional conceptual boundaries can facilitate an enhanced understanding of self-imposed limitations and also potentially serves to highlights pathways for transcending such limitations. Lieberman and Miller (2005) advocate the necessity for educators to embrace a “cosmopolitan rejoinder” in the face of educational change. This means commitment to an educational ethos which supports enablement rather than prescription of good practice and which prioritises the tacit knowledge and teacher creativity. In the case of the poetry teacher, the adoption of an integrated pedagogy which provides opportunities for more connected and inclusive ways of knowing (Kind et al., 2005) holds the possibility to recalibrate current pedagogical disequilibrium. Drawing meaningful value from poetry within the contemporary classroom is neither an elusive or utopian task, it is a pedagogic necessity. In the development of a resourceful and innovative society, the provision of an integrated pedagogy which recognises that both the cognitive and the affective has much to offer. The development of pupils as both critically engaged and creative thinkers is now more than ever an educational imperative.

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